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## To the Editor

*Peter Bell, chairman of the Metropolitan Council, responds to two articles in the Winter 2003-04 issue of American Experiment Quarterly—first to Minnesota Policy Blueprint: “Task Force on Metropolitan Governance” and then to Kristin Robbins’s “Affordable Housing: How ‘Smart Growth’ Dashes Minnesota Dream Homes.” Robbins’s reply follows.*

EVER SINCE ITS CREATION IN 1967, THERE has been great debate about the Metropolitan Council—about how broad its powers should be, and about whether its members should be elected by the people or appointed by the governor.

The recent report by the Center of the American Experiment’s Task Force on Regional Governance is the latest effort to stir this debate.

I am encouraged that the report acknowledges the need for regional planning to ensure the efficient use of sewers, roads, parks, and other regional infrastructure. The Metropolitan Council was, after all, conceived by Republicans who were concerned more than three decades ago about the cost of providing regional services.

I also am pleased that the center’s report effectively endorses some of the initiatives that the current Metropolitan Council appointed by Gov. Tim Pawlenty has been working on during the past year, for example:

- **Land Supply** In our *2030 Regional Development Framework*, the council responds to past complaints from builders that were cited by the task force about the lack of an adequate land supply to meet market needs. The Framework provides for a rolling

twenty-year supply of sewerage land to ensure that we can keep pace with development, keep land prices down, and accommodate our region’s projected growth in an affordable manner.

- **Adjacent Counties** Everyone recognizes that this metropolitan area is larger than seven counties, as the task force report argues and we acknowledge in our *Regional Framework*. Our council is committed to building a close, cooperative relationship with the surrounding counties. We already have held the first of what we hope will be many productive meetings with the adjacent counties, and we will seek other opportunities to share information and undertake joint projects on a voluntary basis. The task force recommends going much further—expanding the council’s actual jurisdiction—and we are anxious to hear the legislative response.
- **Play or Pay** Like the task force, we have been exploring the concept of providing an option to communities that don’t want to assume *their share of the region’s growth* and make the most efficient use of regional infrastructure. The concept is to allow them to pay the incremental cost of having that growth go elsewhere. Of course, the devil is in the details. It could be enormously difficult to determine with precision where this displaced growth is forced to go, and to calculate the added cost of providing roads, sewers, and other services. At this point, it’s too early to say whether a workable system can be developed.

While I am in agreement with the task force on these and other items, the report also contains several recommendations

with which I must take issue.

First, the task force proposes to replace the council with a state department of regional planning. It is difficult to see how a single gubernatorial appointee could be more responsive to the needs of seven counties, 188 municipalities and 2.7 million people than a council with a chair and sixteen members representing districts within the region. Our sixteen members meet regularly with local officials, attend community functions, and keep in touch with emerging issues within their respective districts

Second, the Task Force proposes that we provide sewers and other costly infrastructure for 6 million people by 2030—nearly double the council's projection for the seven-county area. This proposal raises all sorts of questions. How would this enormous cost be financed? What new taxes would be needed to help pay for it? What would this do to the very competitive sewer rates now paid by the homeowners and businesses in our region? What would happen "if we built it and they didn't come"? This proposal also could put the council in the position of dictating to the market where development will go, rather than responding to market needs. As a conservative, that makes me very uncomfortable.

Finally, the task force envisions a very fragmented system of regional planning and governance, with different functions being spun off to multiple agencies. Even the most sophisticated local official (much less the average citizen) would have a difficult time knowing who is responsible for what. This proposal also could undermine the original legislative intent in creating the council—to provide for the orderly, economical development of the seven-county area and ensure the efficient use of our regional systems.

Again, the task force report makes several recommendations I agree with, and

others that cause me concern. Nevertheless, the ideas reflected in the report merit public discussion and debate. If the report can generate some healthy discussion about regional governance, calm some of the controversy that has historically hobbled the council, and achieve some positive change, then the region will be better for it.

—PB

KRISTIN J. ROBBINS PROVIDES THOUGHTFUL observations about the complexity of factors influencing the supply of affordable housing in the Twin Cities. As she indicates, a combination of approaches will be necessary to address land costs, construction costs, zoning and code requirements, and loss of tax incentives that challenge the region's ability to provide affordable housing.

I agree with her conclusion that "there's no single program or approach...that will be the silver bullet to provide adequate affordable housing," and I think her recommendations for federal, state, regional, and local initiatives to increase affordable housing opportunities deserve careful consideration.

In fact, the Metropolitan Council's **2030 Regional Development Framework** already incorporates her recommendation to increase the developable supply of land by expanding the area served by regional infrastructure. And the council's Livable Communities Program already assists communities in reducing the cost of development by assisting with the cleanup of polluted lands for redevelopment, supporting the development and preservation of affordable housing, and funding elements of city-initiated development proposals that will encourage private investment in affordable housing.

While there is much about the article I can support, there are a number of statements with which I must take exception.

First, let's be clear: The **2030 Regional Development Framework** is not the "Bell Framework." Rather, the Framework is the product of a very thorough deliberative process in which the council members appointed by Gov. Tim Pawlenty reviewed multiple drafts of this document page-by-page and line-by-line.

Secondly, labeling the council's Framework as "the new council's acceptance of the smart-growth agenda" and a "conservative spin on...[a] utopian vision" is unfair and inaccurate. The Framework acknowledges that most of the region's housing needs in the coming decades will be met by the private market responding to changing market demands and preferences. And the Framework emphasizes this council's desire to work closely with our regional partners—including local communities, builders, and others—to meet market needs.

Finally, trying to link the current council to the previous administration distracts from the real issue: what can this region do to increase its supply of affordable housing? The council's policies and programs make significant contributions toward addressing that question. They help local communities cost-effectively accommodate growth, encourage expanded choices in housing location and types, and have leveraged millions of dollars of private investments in affordable housing options.

The **Framework** commits the council to working with local communities to accommodate forecast growth in an efficient and cost-effective manner. Recognizing that community needs vary, the Framework provides a range of strategies tailored to meet local needs. In communities well served by roads and transit, those strategies include encouraging (but not requiring) growth along transit corridors and major thoroughfares to ensure that the region makes the best possible use of its investments in transportation infrastructure.

Does this approach restrict growth to only certain densities along certain transit corridors? No. In fact, council policies seek to expand choices in housing types throughout the region. Are the council's policies trying to "impose a singular vision on a diverse society"? Absolutely not. Council policies seek to increase the choices available in the region, more types of housing, more choices for travel, more flexibility for growing communities to decide where and how development should occur. Are those policies intended to impose "high density" on the region? No. The target densities in the **Framework** are based on familiar neighborhood patterns—they are densities common in communities such as Eden Prairie, Maple Grove, and Hastings.

Ms. Robbins wonders, "Wouldn't we all like to live in a community with a strong sense of identity and where we could walk to work and entertainment and run all of our errands from one parking spot"? But, she says, "it's unlikely that this ideal can become reality."

I can report that in the Twin Cities this ideal is already very real. Read the ads in the latest Parade of Homes. There is a growing market for the kind of community she describes. Walk through the East Village in Minneapolis. Spend some time at Heart of the City in Burnsville. Drive out to Mound to see the progress the city is making on its Mound Harbor Renaissance. All of these successful projects, and a growing list of others, are examples of city-initiated responses to market demand. Some of them have been assisted by the council's Livable Communities programs. Many of them include affordable housing. All of them are served by regional infrastructure and all developed consistent with regional growth policies—as did other choices such as more traditional suburban neighborhoods.

We are a state and a region used to this kind of success, and used to the hard work

and creativity needed to achieve it. This region does not have a housing shortage, but it does lack enough affordable housing units. Clearly, there is more hard work to be done.

**Peter Bell**

**Kristen Robbins responds**

I AM PLEASED THAT METROPOLITAN Council Chairman Peter Bell largely agrees with my observations regarding the underlying causes for the affordable housing shortage, as well as my suggestions for employing more market-driven solutions that will enable low-income families to build wealth as they meet their housing needs.

I also want to commend Mr. Bell and the Metropolitan Council on their decision to increase the supply of developable land and their commitment to maintain a twenty-year supply of land over time. This change, as well as the council's support for flexible staging of growth, will help ease pressure on land prices. Such a significant policy change would not have been possible without Mr. Bell's able leadership. I have been privileged to be acquainted with him over the years and am heartened that he is at the helm of our regional planning authority.

I would like to briefly respond to the points in my paper with which Mr. Bell took exception.

First, he wanted to clarify that the new regional development plan, known as the **Framework** is not the **Bell Framework** as I had termed it. This point is well-taken. My sole purpose in using that nomenclature was to help readers distinguish the current regional planning document from the previous **Blueprint 2030** adopted by Ted Mondale's Met Council. I did not mean to imply that Chairman Bell was the sole author.

Second, Mr. Bell takes issue with my comparisons of the current **Framework** with the previous administration's **Blueprint**,

arguing that such analysis "distracts" from the real issue of how the region should increase its supply of affordable housing. On the contrary, given Mr. Mondale's strong support of smart growth policies, such a side-by-side analysis of the two documents' striking similarities provides the reader with important information.

After careful analysis of both documents, I concluded that, "While I agree that the Framework is less prescriptive and generally more open to allowing market forces to operate in regional development, the difference is a matter of degree, rather than a genuine change in philosophy (p. 92)."

Finally, Mr. Bell took exception to my assertion that the **Framework** "puts a conservative spin on...[a] utopian vision." He termed this statement "unfair and inaccurate." While he may believe it is unfair, it is not inaccurate.

The Framework strongly encourages and provides financial incentives for high-density, mixed-use developments along transit corridors. The purported benefits of these Transit-Oriented Developments (TODs), as described in the **Framework**, are:

"Improved access to jobs, open space, cultural amenities...fewer-and shorter-auto trips, more housing options...a significant reduction in the number of vehicle trips and vehicle miles traveled, slower growth in traffic congestion, improved air quality, a healthier environment...shorter daily commutes...more time for personal and family activities (p. 6)."

While the word "utopian" is admittedly strong, a policy that purports to substantially alleviate job, cultural, environmental, traffic, housing and personal problems deserves the term.

The central premise of my paper is that many popular smart growth policies, such as infill and TODs, exacerbate the affordable housing shortage by driving up the cost of land and construction. Furthermore, because TODs require a significant

middle- or upper-income population to support the high-end retail/entertainment options, such developments usually include few affordable units. Those that are affordable tend to be on the upper end of the “affordable” scale, leaving fewer resources available for the development of housing that would truly be affordable to those with low- and very-low incomes.

**Kristin J. Robbins**  
**Plymouth, Minnesota**

MAPLE GROVE IS IN THE MIDST OF A moratorium on new residential housing applications and is developing a formula by which future permits for new developments will be awarded. When public hearings on the matter begin, the topics of affordable housing, traffic congestion, density, and the role of local/regional government in the selection of “appropriate” housing will undoubtedly be at the forefront. It was therefore with great interest that I read “Affordable Housing: How ‘Smart Growth’ Dashes Minnesota Dream Homes” by Kristin Robbins (Winter 2003-04)

By exposing the negative impact so-called Smart Growth plans have on the cost of housing, Kristin’s cogent arguments should cause all reasonable affordable housing proponents to seriously reconsider their support of the Smart Growth agenda. Her analysis is yet other recognition of the universal nature of the basic laws of supply and demand, and calls into question the true motivations of Smart Growth/affordable housing advocates.

Americans value freedom. The freedom to live, work, attend church, school, and other social functions in areas of our choosing is no exception. All the policy papers, blueprints, frameworks, and utopian visioning by regional government that assume that we’ll accept high-density housing situated along traffic corridors will not change the simple fact that most of us do not wish to live in such developments or conditions.

I generally oppose government subsidies, those for affordable housing being no exception. However, her section entitled “Helping Low-Income Families Build Wealth” provides an innovative idea that could help make a significant number of low-income families independent of the housing subsidy system—a worthy goal. I also found her analysis of the impact of good old market forces and competition to be of particular interest. I believe it should be a key area of consideration by government at all levels.

I would caution against her proposal that encourages local governments to waive or reduce permit, utility and park fees as a cost-reduction method. If, as she claims, these fees are truly revenue oriented and only loosely related to the cost of providing the services, we should instead advocate the reduction or elimination of these fees for all residents of the community, not just for those building new affordable housing units. To do otherwise is simply adding another subsidy and another avenue for wealth redistribution.

Kristin Robbins’s work is a valuable and informative addition to the discussion and should be considered required reading for those who will have input into the shaping of housing policy throughout the Metro area. I thank her for her contribution.

**Larry Colson**  
**Maple Grove Planning Commissioner**

YOUR “CIVILITY IN POLITICS” (WINTER 2003–04) was particularly timely as the presidential cycle rounds the final bends. Your writers offered wide and varied opinions as to civility’s current state.

I don’t recall, however, that any selections pointed a wagging figure to the U.S. Supreme Court’s infamous *New York Times v. Sullivan* decision in 1964. Beginning there in earnest, the legal protection of what can be said about a public figure was substantially disassembled. Unless a writer’s

assertions are provable as knowingly and maliciously untrue at the time of their dissemination, the slandered public figure has no recourse. The curious result is that while truth is always a defense to the writer, untruth is not always a case for the defamed. Perforce the lazy, negligent, and even reckless writer is always on safe ground. Proving that writer *knew* his lie was a lie is a nearly insurmountable distance from proving that the writer *should have known* his lie was a lie. Since then, the outrageous headlines of our tabloids have become blaring regularities in our supermarkets. And the dastardly charges by political writers have followed suit.

Vice President Dick Cheney is corrupt and on the take from Halliburton. President Clinton had witnesses murdered in Arkansas. We are now awash in an unchecked and unrestrainable tide of defamation. And we wonder that good citizens tune out?

The Court's underlying rationale was that since a public figure intends to put her life in the limelight, she should not be immune from the muck thrown from behind the lights. Indeed, reasoned the Court, because of the vital importance of the public's right to know, and the critic's right to freedom of speech, a public figure's legal protections of her cast and character are secondary and held to a more difficult standard than for the rest of us. It seems to me, if a besmirched public figure wants to have her day in court, that's an unmistakable decision to walk into some *real* limelight. And once there, she deserves an unstacked deck. Ironically enough, if the standards for slander were brought back to earth, there would be more celebrities taking their grievances to trial, and a delicious boon in sales for the media would result. And truth would be seen to prevail once again, whether the writer's or public figure's. In fact, with more sane legal hurdles,

we would come to suspect the scandalized figure who *did not sue*; thus promoting the public figure's own affirmative impetus to defend and prove their character to us, clearly and convincingly. Now that's something we could do with more of. Instead, today we don't blame them for ignoring it. Who knows what to believe?

All too often, commentators point to the vicious smears of the Adams/Jefferson campaign as evidence that incivility has always been with us. But the fact is that in two centuries, that sort of over-the-top slander has been the exception, not the rule—especially for presidential contests. The *New York Times v. Sullivan* decision, however, marks a distinguishable benchmark in civil America's race to the bottom. And once again, we have the courts to thank for it.

*Stan D. Donnelly*  
*St. Paul*

I HAVE SAVED ALMOST ALL OF MY RECORD albums over the years, and I still enjoy listening to them, scratchy sound and all. I write of this not to discuss records (or vinyl, as they are now known), but because the recent articles on civility call to mind one of my favorite albums. It's an old comedy album, "You Can't Beat People Up and Make Them Say I Love You."

This seems a most appropriate description of the complete breakdown of civility and collegiality in politics. Politics has always been an ideological battleground, and rightly so. But there are vast differences in political conduct between the past and present, with enormous and in my opinion negative consequences to the process and its results.

In the past, political debate centered on issues. To be sure, debates during campaigns and the legislative session were hard fought and tough. Politics has never been an occupation for the thin-skinned or the

faint of heart. But the debate focused on the views being expressed, not on the character of the person expressing them. When the day was done, the combatants shook hands and moved on.

Not so in today's political environment. Now those holding opposing beliefs are deemed evil and vilified. The focus of political discourse has shifted from the beliefs themselves to the personal character of the participants. Assailing your opponent has replaced assailing your opponent's views.

Words matter. Civility breeds respect, and mutual respect is what allows politicians to work together toward the public good. It is very difficult for people who have been savaging each other all day to come together to forge policy in the public interest. I have heard numerous politicians in recent years claim that they can build bridges and work with the opposition. How can this be true when those same politicians launch stinging personal attacks not

on their opponent's beliefs but on their opponents themselves?

The political process functions best when the majority and minority both realize that their roles can and in due course will reverse. It is therefore in the majority's interest to treat the minority with respect and civility. When this does not happen, the pent-up anger of the minority is visited on the majority when the balance of power shifts, re-enforcing negative patterns. We all suffer as a result.

The late Tom Kelm, who was one of the most successful politicians of his time, believed that the idea was to defeat your opponents, not to destroy them. If more politicians adopted this philosophy, the world would be a better place.

*Lisa Lebedoff Peilen*  
*St. Louis Park, Minnesota*

